

The Washington Post _____
 The New York Times _____
 The Washington Times _____
 The Wall Street Journal _____
 The Christian Science Monitor _____
 New York Daily News _____
 USA Today _____
 The Chicago Tribune _____
 Date 30 May 1991

Webster Hopeful About Hostages

By RUTH SINAI

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - CIA Director William Webster said Thursday he was "cautiously optimistic" about signs that Iran is seeking a reconciliation with the West and that a deal might be worked out to release Americans held by pro-Iranian radicals in Lebanon.

"There are enough bubble signs that are reminiscent of other times when hostages were released," he said at an interview with reporters to mark the end of his four-year stint as the country's top intelligence official.

But Webster declined to elaborate, saying the matter was too sensitive.

Six Americans are among 13 Westerners believed held by pro-Iranian militants in Lebanon. The last Americans released were Robert Polhill and Frank H. Reed, freed in April 1990 after more than three years of captivity.

Both were freed with the help of Syria, the main power broker in Lebanon which is enjoying a gradual thaw the United States despite its alleged support for terrorism.

A team of State Department and CIA counter-terrorism officials visited Damascus recently to discuss U.S. accusations of Syrian support for terrorism, including its backing of radical Palestinian organizations.

But an official familiar with the mission said the Syrians "stiffed us," listening but failing to promise change.

Nonetheless, Webster said Syria had been helpful in preventing terrorism by Palestinians allied with Iraq during the Gulf war earlier this year.

"Some who relied on Syria in the past didn't receive it, or received less" support, he said.

The latest movement in the hostage saga came earlier this week when the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, which is believed to hold some of the Western hostages, said it was also holding two Israelis. Israel said in response it would be willing to free all its Lebanese prisoners in return for seven Israelis missing in Lebanon.

Israel's top negotiator, Uri Lubrani, said Iran and its surrogates in Lebanon wouldn't free the Western hostages unless they got something from Israel.

Meanwhile Iran's President Hashemi Rafsanjani told an international conference of oil officials this week that his country wants to rejoin the world economy after years of isolation.

"Something good could come of it," Webster said of the recent movement.

The longest-held hostage is Terry Anderson, chief Middle East correspondent for The Associated Press, captured in March 1985.